

Cuorno, Mario

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Abraham Lincoln Comparisons

Mario Cuomo

Excerpts from newspapers and other sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

NY Sunday Times
8/26/84

When Moral Ideas And Politics Clash

To the Editor:

In 1960, Kennedy the candidate lived under the historical shadow of Protestant fears about AJ Smith's Catholicism. Kennedy the President proved them groundless. Now some Catholic spokesmen fear instead that current Catholic politicians may not be Catholic enough when they personally oppose abortions but will not vote to outlaw them.

True, many Catholics, according to the polls, accept abortions to save the life of a mother or as a response to rape, so the hedging of Catholic mainline politicians on this matter is not likely to lose them many votes. But does this mean that they must be opportunists, indifferent to the influence of moral ideas on their political convictions? It is useful to consider Lincoln's handling of an analogous dilemma.

Lincoln was morally opposed to slavery and made it the basis of his campaign against Senator Douglas. Yet he accepted the legal obligations to return fugitive slaves to their owners. He denounced the Supreme Court's decision indirectly invalidating the Missouri Compromise, yet he was later willing to consider guaranteeing slavery in the South if it would preserve the Union.

The Protestant theologian Reinhold Niebuhr was a persistent defender of Lincoln's way of thinking because "considerations of moderation" rightly entered into the application of moral ideas to political life. In Niebuhr's time, it was the Protestant pastors of the social gospel, with their enthusiasm for prohibition and pacifism, who most needed his realism in the 1930's.

Now, it seems, some Catholic moralists need a Lincoln or a Niebuhr to show how mediated the relation between morality and politics must be. Lincoln's position reflected his sense of complexity, not his moral diffidence. Lord Charnwood called it "a deadly moderation" that knew precisely where it stood and why it stood there.

Geraldine A. Ferraro and Mario Cuomo will need the understanding of a Niebuhr and the close thinking of a Lincoln to meet their critics, but so far they are at least right to know that politics cannot simply accept moral ideas without any work of translation.

CUSHING STROUT

Ithaca, N.Y., Aug. 14, 1984

The writer is E.J. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters at Cornell University.

N.Y. Times

9/9/84

Of Ferraro, Cuomo and Moral Issues Confused With Dogma

To the Editor:

In his Aug. 26 letter, Cushing Strout raised the issue of a Catholic politician's responsibility to his or her moral beliefs (specifically, abortion) and sought to illuminate it by reviewing Lincoln's approach to slavery.

Lincoln was morally opposed to slavery, wrote Professor Strout, but was willing to make compromises. He accepted the legal obligation to return slaves to their owners and even considered guaranteeing slavery in the South if it would preserve the Union. The professor might also have cited Lincoln's support for compensation of slave owners upon the loss of a valuable asset.

What is disappointing about Professor Strout's comparison is that he does not develop it to a satisfactory conclusion but simply ends by stating that politicians like Geraldine Ferraro and Mario Cuomo "... are at least right to know that politics cannot simply accept moral ideas without any work of translation." I would like to attempt some translating.

Representative Ferraro and Governor Cuomo have stated that they are

personally opposed to abortion but will not impose their religious beliefs on others. At the outset, they have based their position on a false assumption, since opposition to abortion is not a religious belief. It is one of many moral issues which the Catholic Church has taken a stand on — as have other faiths and other groups with no Catholic connection.

Such politicians are confusing moral issues with dogmas, e.g., the Trinity, the Immaculate Conception, the divinity of Christ. The church has frequently taken a stand on similar moral issues. In his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, Pope Leo XIII espoused the cause of the working man, including the right to a just wage. Racial and religious discrimination and nuclear war have also been condemned, both by the Papacy and by official and unofficial congregations of bishops.

If these are truly "religious beliefs," then they are daily being "imposed on others," such as employers and landlords, who may sincerely believe that they have the right to control their own businesses or rental properties. One must conclude that Catholic

politicians should either look for a new argument or, better yet, have the courage of their moral convictions.

Which brings us back to President Lincoln. True, Lincoln was willing to compromise some of his positions on slavery, but he did so only to effect his overriding goal — slavery's eventual abolition. Similarly, if a person in public office is morally convinced that abortion is the unwarranted taking of innocent human life, that person should seek to eliminate, so far as is reasonably possible, what he or she perceives to be a grievous wrong.

Compromises may have to be made, the most obvious exceptions being in cases of rape, incest, mental instability or danger to the life of the mother, but if one honestly believes in the moral rectitude of a cause, one should not cravenly use religion as an excuse for inaction.

If Abraham Lincoln had taken the same position toward slavery that Mr. Cuomo and Mrs. Ferraro have taken toward abortion, slavery could well have extended into the 20th century.

ALFRED G. BOYLAN
Rochester, Aug. 30, 1984

Kemp Steps Up the Battle, Aims at Cuomo at Gettysburg

SUMMARY: The GOP's preoccupation with Democratic Gov. Mario Cuomo, who is hardly enjoying a comfortable margin of support, moved to a higher plane in late November. Fellow New Yorker Jack Kemp, no stranger himself to presidential aspirations, took to the battlefield to defend his party's vision of upward mobility. Remarks by Cuomo had prompted the response, delivered in a tiff framed by Abraham Lincoln.

In November, he became the first Democrat in New York history to be elected to a third term as governor. But in doing so, he received a scant 53 percent of the vote against two token opponents, a considerable drop-off from four years ago, when he posted a record 65 percent. The land he so loves to govern is showing, in

President Walter F. Mondale led Ronald Reagan, 52 to 40 percent.

So why is it that Republicans are so preoccupied by Mario Matthew Cuomo?

"It has nothing to do with records or anything else; it's just a question of how he comes across," says David Garth, a New York-based media consultant and Cuomo

book is a compilation of Lincoln's sayings and writings. It includes a preface by Cuomo, who started the project last year after learning in a meeting in Albany with visiting Solidarity students that material on Lincoln was nonexistent in Poland.

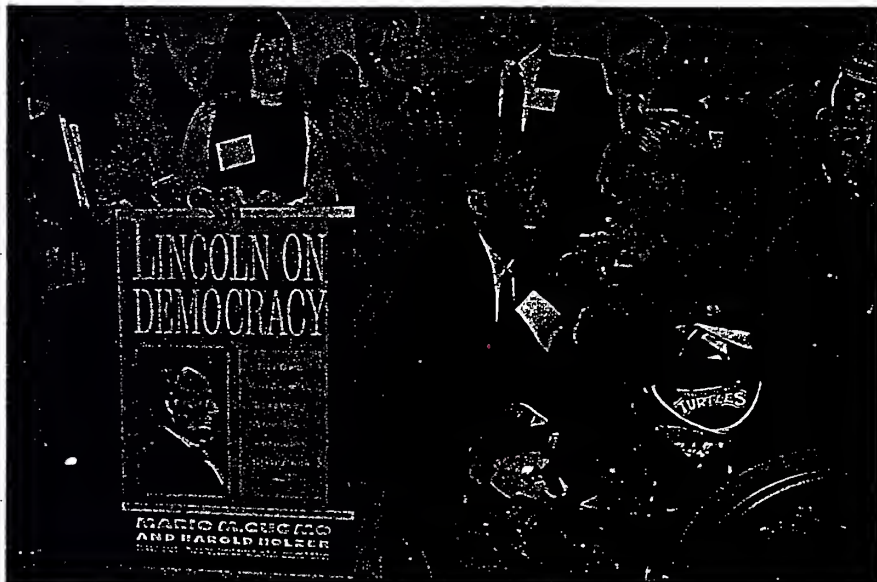
If Cuomo's intentions were noble when he began the project, Republicans cried foul when the egalitarian-minded governor enlisted Honest Abe in the current debate over fairness and class distinction. Cuomo, along with other leading Democrats like Senate Majority Leader George J. Mitchell of Maine and House Majority Leader Richard A. Gephardt of Missouri, argues that the party of Abraham Lincoln is more interested these days in protecting the advantaged than in reaching out to the disadvantaged.

Enter Kemp, the secretary of housing and urban development, a former football quarterback (for the Buffalo Bills) and a conservative stalwart. He contended in a speech at Gettysburg that the GOP argument of empowerment for the underclass is more in line with the Lincolnian traditions of homesteading and emancipation.

"This was not designed to take apart Mario Cuomo or to engage in an ad hominem attack," Kemp says. "I am not responding to one person or just one idea but the fact that Lincoln's transcendent vision was the equality of opportunity and upward mobility of the American dream, as opposed to looking at America as a zero-sum, static condition, all under the rubric of fairness."

Politicians linking themselves to demigods is nothing new in American politics. Ronald Reagan, for example, made wide use of Franklin Roosevelt in his speeches. Gerald Ford kept a bust of Harry Truman in the Oval Office. Gary Hart parroted John Kennedy's physical mannerisms for his own presidential quests.

Kemp himself has not shied away from the similarities of his monogram and that of a martyred president. And all modern-day candidates long to connect with Lincoln, the irony being that Lincoln today would face the triple whammy of telegenic politics (large bones, dark facial hair, a squeaky voice). The practice of cutting across party lines is fair, scholars argue, as long as the comparisons are just. "They can compare themselves to Caesar, Alexander the Great or whatever," contends James David Barber, a Duke University pres-



In Albany and on national talk shows, Cuomo promoted his Honest Abe project.

his words, "signs of fiscal collapse" despite a record tax increase earlier this year. Faced with a budget shortfall that could reach \$3 billion by next year and a public that will not tolerate new taxes, the governor is betraying his own liberal pedigree by firing state workers and reducing spending on education and on health care for the poor.

History does not appear to be on his side, either. A mid-November survey by the Times Mirror Center for People and the Press has him losing to George Bush, 50 to 37 percent, in a dry run for 1992. And that is not a good sign for a Democratic challenger. Four years ago, then Colorado Sen. Gary Hart led Bush in the same poll, 51 to 38 percent. And in January 1983, amid a national recession, former Vice

adviser. "There's a potential Republicans are afraid of. There's a blue-collar aspect to go with a topflight intellect, and that makes him a very dangerous opponent."

"What it really boils down to is not so much that they dislike him personally," adds Cuomo biographer Robert McElvaine. "It's just that they fear him more than anything else."

The GOP obsession with the "Hamlet of the Hudson" reached new heights in late November when Cuomo and Jack F. Kemp Jr. tangled over, of all things, the ghost of Abraham Lincoln. Earlier in the month, the governor had hit the national talk show circuit promoting "Lincoln on Democracy," a new book on the 16th president. Pieced together by eight presidential scholars, the

Cuomo has never been shy about sniping at Kemp. Asked once what he thought of Kemp, he replied: "I think he played too long without a helmet."

idential historian. "The point is how accurate is it on both ends."

Like Cuomo's, Kemp's interests in Lincoln are more than a passing fancy. Cuomo cites Lincoln as one of his three heroes, the other two being FDR and Sir Thomas More. Kemp, a former U.S. representative from Buffalo, kept Lincoln busts in his Capitol Hill office. After taking over at Housing and Urban Development early last year, one of his first directives was to ask employees for suggestions on new murals for halls of the agency's headquarters in Southwest Washington. The memorandum prompted some sarcasm: One wag suggested great moments in the NFL; another, great golf holes. Kemp eventually chose about 40 of the 9-by-12 murals, including four with Lincoln-related scenes.

But Lincoln also gives a short-term lift to Kemp, who is at something of a career crossroads these days. Although he receives high marks for restoring some integrity to the scandal-plagued housing agency and presently is chairman of the President's Task Force on Empowerment, Kemp is the odd man out in the Bush administration. While he talks of bringing the empowerment agenda to America's inner cities, the reality is a man caught in pincers. The director of the Office of Management and Budget, Richard G. Darman, considers Kemp's empowerment little more than "neo-neoism" warmed over from the Sixties. And Democrats on Capitol Hill are skeptical of breathing new philosophy into the long-dormant agency. Friends say this leaves Jack Kemp in a political no-man's-land.

He's still in the mode of trying to figure out whether the president and the White House think it's important that the Republican Party regain its Reaganaut standing as the party of economic growth," says Kemp confidant and fellow supply-sider Jude Wanniski. "What it really comes down to is whether the president in January is willing to throw down the gauntlet to the Democrats on behalf of a growth agenda."

Kemp's battles with Darman likely will not end until one of the two principals switches jobs or leaves the administration. Both covet Treasury Secretary Nicholas F. Brady's job, but neither would be a leading candidate should it open up. Kemp says he can keep HUD's relations with Congress under control. The OMB director is another matter. "Darman has directly challenged everything that I believe in, and I am going to answer Dick Darman," Kemp

avows. "You just take my word for it, I am going to answer Dick Darman."

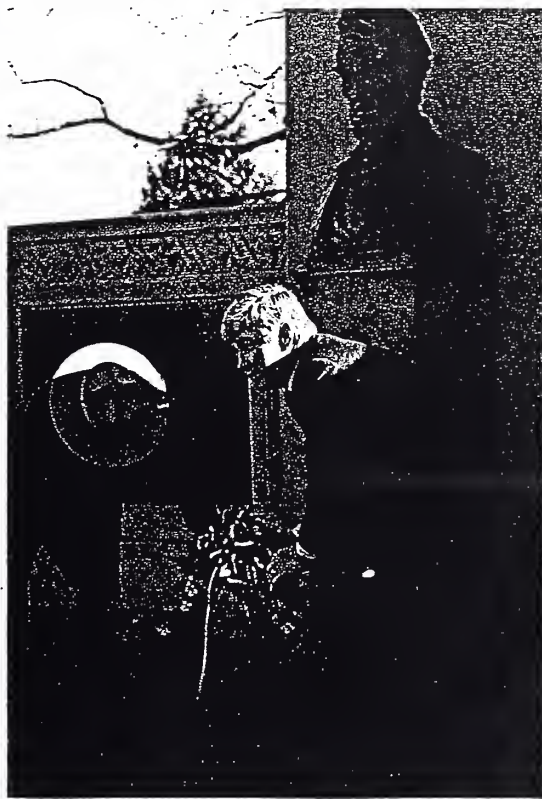
In the meantime, the Lincoln tiff with Cuomo keeps Kemp's name in the news. Wanniski and other conservatives lobbied Kemp to challenge for the chairmanship of the Republican National Committee, a post Kemp said he would not have accepted anyway because he can be more effective working inside the administration. But Kemp, like other conservatives in these days of diminishing communism and confused domestic policies, needs a foil. "He needs an enemy desperately, and the best way to get in the press is to go after somebody who by definition is news," says GOP consultant Eddie Mahe Jr. "Cuomo, by definition, is news because every press person is enamored of Mario Cuomo."

Cuomo and Kemp have a history of feuding, due in part to similar backgrounds and convergent careers. Both are former jocks (Cuomo toiled in the Pittsburgh Pirates' farm system). Both also like to style themselves as party intellectuals. Twice in his career — before the elections of 1982 and 1990 — Kemp has been pressured to run against Cuomo for governor. What do they think of each other? "Jack respects Cuomo as a political force, but he's convinced Cuomo is a snake oil salesman who is a fundamental fraud," says a friend of the HUD secretary. For his part, Cuomo has never been shy about sniping at Kemp. Asked once what he thought of Kemp, he replied: "I think he played too long without a helmet."

Appropriately enough, the feud has played out on the fields of Gettysburg. A year ago, on the 126th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address, Cuomo made the pilgrimage to the Soldier's National Cemetery. Speaking on a bitterly cold November afternoon about 200 yards from the site of the 1863 address, Cuomo raised the fairness issue. "In 1854, he had asked himself this question: 'Why . . . should we have government?' And he answered: 'The legitimate object of government is to do for the people what needs to be done, but which they cannot, by individual effort, do at all, or do so well, for themselves.'"

This year, on a sunny, 50-degree day,

Kemp trekked to the same cemetery to give his own 20-minute, 2,000-word rebuttal. (Historical footnote: The original address was only 268 words; it took Lincoln impersonator James A. Getty about four minutes to tear through it.) On the 127th anniversary of the great speech, empowerment replaced fairness as the byword du jour. "Why struggle to redistribute existing wealth?" Kemp asked his Gettysburg audience. "Let us commit ourselves to Lincoln's vision of democracy: creating new wealth, empowering the poor, opening up access to property, expanding home ownership, creating more jobs, encouraging



Kemp's retort came in Lincoln's shadow.

more entrepreneurs, reducing the need for welfare."

So Kemp got his 15 — make that 20 — minutes in the sun and shade of the Gettysburg cemetery. Now he returns to Washington with an agenda unfulfilled and an administration perhaps unwilling to fight his battles. "I really believe in a conservative war on poverty, and I want to see it through," says the secretary. "And if I don't get a chance to end it, at least I want to take it to the borders of Berlin."

"I want at least a Normandy landing."

— Bill Whalen

